DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 344 282 EA 023 675

AUTHOR Chinien, Chris A.; Boutin, France
TITLE Is Our Nation at Risk: Corporate Leaders Respond.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Corporate Support; *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Public Schools; *School Effectiveness; *School Restructuring
IDENTIFIERS *Canada

ABSTRACT

In recent years the disquieting evidences regarding the poor performance of public education in the United States have led Americans to believe that their nation was at risk. This apprehension has been translated into numerous recommendations for educational reforms. A brief overview of the American public school system uses qualitative examples to illustrate its problems. In Canada the call for change in education has been less dramatic and alarming. However, increasingly business leaders are expressing their dissatisfaction with Canada's public schools. Widespread illiteracy and the significant proportion of high school dropouts provide some worrisome indicators about the performance of those schools. Canadian corporate leaders believe that its economic competitiveness as a nation is threatened because its public schools fail to prepare a significant number of young Canadians to face the challenges of an internationalized knowledge-based economy. Evidence to substantiate these concerns is drawn from qualitative and quantitative studies in the late 80s and early 90s. (20 references) (RR)

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IS OUR NATION AT RISK: CORPORATE LEADERS RESPOND

Chris A. Chinien, Ph.D.
and
France Boutin, Ph.D
Faculty of Education
University of Manitoba

Address: University of Manitoba
Faculty of Education
Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3T 2N2

Telephone: (204) 474-8271 (Office)
(204) 474-9014 (Messages)
(204) 261-1630 (Home)

FAX (204) 275-5962

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Abstract

In recent years the disquieting evidences regarding the poor performance of public education in the United States have lead the Americans to believe that their nation was at risk. This apprehension has been translated into numerous recommendations for educational reforms. In Canada the call for change in education has been less dramatic and alarming. However, increasingly business leaders are expressing their dissatisfactions with our public school system. Widespread illiteracy and the significant proportion of high school drop outs provide some worrisome indicators about the performance of our public school system. Canadian corporate leaders believe that our competitiveness as a nation is threatened because our public schools fail to prepare a significant number of young Canadians to face the challenges of an internationalized knowledge-base economy.

IS OUR NATION AT RISK: CORPORATE LEADERS RESPOND

> Our economic performance in the nineties can be improved if our education and training system achieves its full potential as a major contributor to economic growth.
>
> CLMPC, 1990.

It is difficult to discuss the performance of the Canadian public school system without referring to the major wave of educational reform which seems to be taking the United States by storm. Therefore in order to provide a springboard for the discussion the major concerns the Americans have for their public school system will be briefly reviewed. Additionally, discussion will focus on the performance of the Canadian public education system and its implications for competitiveness as a nation.

The unrest and uncertainty caused by the launch of the Sputnik in 1957 urged the Americans to review their educational system and to implement major recommendations for educational reforms in an attempt to keep up with scientific and technological development. More recently the breakthrough of the European and Japanese in the area of high technology has been perceived as a threat to the U.S. economic stability and competitiveness in world trade. Again we have seen the same momentum for educational reform develop. The underlying assumptions guiding these reform movements is that a more educated work force would be better prepared to meet these challenges and to put the United States back in the forefront of

industrialized nations both in scientific and technological development.

The long-held superiority of the U.S. in technology is slipping away. A former U.S. Secretary of Education, Terrell H. Bell notes: "Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5). This lost superiority in scientific and technological development is accompanied by an apparent loss in educational superiority. Studies show that the average achievement of high school students on standardized tests in the U.S. is lower than 26 years ago, when the Sputnik was launched. The Education Commission of the States (1983) reports that a 1979 testing showed that 13 percent of the seventeen-year-olds could not perform minimal, functional literacy reading tasks, 53 percent could not write a letter for the purpose of correcting a billing error, only 15 percent could write a persuasive statement. Moreover, 40 to 50 percent of all urban students have serious reading problems. Recently the New York Telephone Company advertised 780 positions and 21,000 young people applied. The company administered a 50-minute reading and reasoning test geared to the high school level and only 16 percent of the applicants passed the test (Osterman, 1988).

In an open letter to the American public, former U.S. Secretary of Education, Terrell H. Bell notes: "The educational foundations of our society are being eroded by a rising tide of

mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, p. 5). Numerous national commissions and task forces have recently been mandated to investigate the problems and weaknesses of American public education.

In Canada the call for change in education has been less dramatic and alarming. This apparent lack of urgency for educational reform can perhaps be attributed to our ignorance of the performance of our educational system. Kelly (1989) notes that "hard evidence on the performance of Canadian schools is difficult to come by" (p. 15). However, in recent years some disturbing feedback from the corporate world is sparking public interest in the quality of Canadian education. Increasingly Canadian business leaders are expressing their dissatisfaction with graduates of the public school system. Surveys conducted by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business indicate that the great majority of its members (70%) believe that students are not being well prepared for work by the high school system. Additionally, employers complained that a worrisome number of students appear to lack basic skills, such as reading, writing, analytical and interpersonal skills (The Canadian Chamber of Commerce, 1989).

The performance of Canadian students on international achievement assessment is another troubling indicator of the performance of our public school system. Results of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) study of science achievement tests provide some

insights regarding the performance of the public school system. Thirteen nations participated in the biology, chemistry and physics assessment. Canadian English-speaking science students (grade 12/13) were placed eleventh on biology and physics, and twelfth on chemistry. French-speaking high school completers from Quebec were ranked last on the science achievement test (Advisory Council on Adjustment, 1989).

A report issued by the U.S. Department of Education (1985) on eighth-grade mathematics competence places Ontario students just below average and students from British Columbia just above average.

The rapid technological development coupled with dramatic sociotechnical changes have altered job content and skill requirements at the workplace. In light of these changes the role of schools as providers of well educated graduates for society is being challenged. Increasingly, employers are calling for more responsive and supportive education. According to business leaders, as we move into an internationalized information based economy, a well educated workforce will be the key factor for maintaining the competitiveness of Canadian businesses. In commenting on this issue Reich (1983) observes:

> skilled labour has become the only dimension of production where advanced industrialized nations can create and retain an advantage ... Production facilities can be established anywhere. Financial capital now flows around the globe at the speed of an electronic impulse. The production process that depends on skilled labour must stay where the skilled labour is (p. 782).

In the same vein the Government of Alberta (1990) notes: "in a global economy increasingly based on knowledge and information, human resources become the driving force behind competitiveness. The new imperative is for a workforce and an economy based on excellence, flexibility and adaptability" (p. 1).

In recent years due to changes in technology and the economy, there has been a shift in emphasis from capital investment to a growing interest for human resource development. Young (1989) argues that the age of traditional manufacturing has gone, and that to remain competitive businesses need employees with greater mental ability, who can operate computers, analyze data and read and understand complicated materials. Similarly the Advisory Council on Adjustment (1989) also note that with the "growing sophistication of work, many occupations which previously were essentially "manual" become increasingly "mental" requiring higher mathematical and language skills as well as scientific and technical literacy (p. 27).

While workplace requirements are calling for employees with higher order skills, it appears that our public school system is failing, and producing an alarming proportion of unemployable graduates. In its report to Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, the Advisory Council on Adjustment (1989) notes that education throughout Canada is in need of significant improvement (p. 29). The Council further states that our education systems "fail to prepare some significant segments of the Canadian population for the challenges of a modern society" (p. 31).

An increased number of corporate leaders are now beginning to attribute Canada's sluggish productivity, in part, to the shortcomings of our education system. According to the Canadian Chamber of Commerce (1988) "the transformation of our economy is increasingly being distorted by the shortcomings of our educational system. Businesses are finding it difficult to function and to grow because they lack access to an adequate number of skilled people (p. 7). Young (1989, citing Creton, 1988) argues that many jobs will remain unfilled because too many entry-level job hunters are too poorly educated to succeed even as waiters, cashiers and hamburger flippers (p. 9).

Although no alarming call for dramatic educational reform has been evidenced in Canada, there are some disturbing findings which raise serious concerns regarding our public school system. Functional illiteracy has become a massive problem of national interest which threatens our ability to compete in a global marketplace. Clamp (1990) argues that: "illiteracy has defied the concerted efforts of decades of public funding and human resources, not to mention over a century of free and universal elementary schooling (p. 22). The recent Southam Literacy Survey (Creative Research Group, 1987) indicates that approximately one out of every four Canadians over the age of 18 is illiterate. Although this survey may have some flaws (Willinsky, 1990), it does raise some concerns. It is estimated that 17 percent of Canadian high school graduates are functionally illiterate (Advisory Council on Adjustment, 1989).

A recent survey conducted by the Conference Board of Canada (Des Lauriers, 1989) on functional illiteracy at the workplace indicates that between 31 to 38 percent of the organizations surveyed identified illiteracy as being a major problem for introducing new technology as well as for implementing workplace education programs. In addition, 41 percent of these companies attributed errors in input and processes to deficiencies in basic skills. Lack of basic skills was also associated to productivity problems (30%) and problems in product quality (27%). In a recent report to the City of Winnipeg, Price Waterhouse (1990) points out that illiteracy has become a national problem which reflects the "ever-increasing complexity of the workplace and the inability of the education systems to keep pace with this change" (p. 20).

Results of a recent survey of business leaders released by the Canadian Labour Market and Productivity Center (1990) revealed that illiteracy was the cause of low productivity (46%), poor product quality (42%) and increased training cost (42%). It is estimated that the cost of illiteracy to business is $4 billion, and that the cost to Canadian society is approximately $10 billion (Des Lauriers, 1989). Many young Canadians are still entering the labour market with deficiencies in basic literacy and numeracy skills. This, of course, is unacceptable when one considers that our spending in education, as a proportion of the gross national product is higher than most other developed countries (Advisory Council on Adjustment, 1989). Functionally illiterate employees

are also ill equipped to cope with rapid technological change at the workplace.

Functional illiteracy constitutes a barrier not only to employment but also to training and retraining (Advisory Council on Adjustment, 1990). The Canadian Chamber of Commerce (1989) notes that: "It is becoming clear to business that its future survival may well depend not only on what is happening in the boardroom, but also upon what is happening in the classroom" (p. 38).

The high percentage of students dropping out of high school is another worrisome indicator of the performance of our public school system. Currently it is estimated that 30% to 35% of young Canadians are not completing high school. Canada has the highest dropout rate among the industrialized nations.

Although according to the British North American Act education is under provincial jurisdiction, there are signs of federal initiatives for providing national leadership in educational reforms. In light of the worrisome status of our public school system, Brian Mulroney, Prime Minister of Canada, argued that the federal government needs to provide national leadership in addressing these problems:

> The government believes the important changes we require in our education and training system to prepare us for the 21st century will only be accomplished through a national effort.

Consistent with his belief, the Prime Minister of Canada has struck a National Commission of Education to study existing education and training systems and make recommendations for change. The federal

government has earmarked $110 million to address the literacy crisis.

Conclusion

Rapid technological development coupled with dramatic socio-technical changes, along with a shift from a manufacturing to a knowledge-intensive economy call for a more educated work force. Many Americans believed that their nation was at risk unless drastic and immediate actions were taken to improve their education system. This reform movement gave rise to the American quest for excellence in education. In Canada the call for change in education has been less dramatic and alarming. However, there is growing evidence that our public school system is failing to prepare a significant number of young Canadians for the challenges ahead. Widespread illiteracy and growing employers' dissatisfaction with the basic skills attainment of high school graduates calls for action. The Newfoundland Committee on Literacy recently noted that disturbing high illiteracy "threatens our competitive edge as a nation and will have devastating implications when the Free Trade Agreement with the United States comes into effect" (p. 10). Since our human resources will become the driving force behind our competitiveness in world trade we may have to conclude, just like the Americans, that "our nation is at risk".

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